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Subway Authorities Eye iPod-Friendly Maps

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NEW YORK -- It seemed like such a great idea: digitally shrink maps of major subway systems and put them online so people can download them to their iPods for free.

Tens of thousands of people have downloaded maps from <http://www.ipodsubwaymaps.com> since Web designer and blogger William Bright, 27, created it in early August.

San Francisco and New York City officials were less enthusiastic.

A lawyer for the Metropolitan Transportation Authority sent Bright a terse "cease and desist" letter in mid-September demanding he immediately remove the New York City subway map from his Web site.

Another letter followed on Sept. 21 from the San Francisco Bay Area Rapid Transit District, instructing Bright to take down his BART system map.

Both agencies said copyrights they held to the maps barred anyone from repackaging and redistributing them without permission.

Bright, who by day works for the online magazine Nerve.Com, quickly complied with both requests but said he was disappointed.

The only money Bright said he received for his efforts came from a few advertisements on his site, which he said generated about \$1 most days.

"This was supposed to be for fun," explained Bright, who signs his blog postings Little Bill and also accepts donations via PayPal.

Bright said it had taken him just 20 minutes of tinkering to chop up an online version of the MTA's subway map and shrink it into parts that could be read more easily on the screen of newer iPod models.

Word about ipodsubwaymaps.com spread quickly after Bright launched it. Before long, 50,000 people had downloaded the New York subway map. The site offers maps for nearly two dozen subway systems including Berlin, Boston, Paris, Philadelphia, Los Angeles, Tokyo and Washington D.C.

Might the MTA have overreacted and in doing so deprived commuters of something useful?

"That's the side that everybody loves to take, that big government is going after the little guy," bristled MTA spokesman Tom Kelly. "But that's not the case. This isn't us singling out one person and one entity."

There is a chance, Kelly added, that Bright will ultimately receive permission to put the map back online.

An MTA lawyer sent Bright an e-mail Thursday offering him a one-year license to distribute the maps for free, as long as he promises to update them regularly. The catch: The MTA wants a licensing fee of \$500.

That worried Bright.

"What if everyone wants \$500?" he asked.

Bright has temporarily taken the Chicago transit map offline while he asks permission to use it.

BART spokesman Linton Johnson said the agency is working on coming up with its own downloadable version of subway maps for on iPods and other portable devices.

He said BART's chief complaint with Bright's maps was that they didn't reflect changes made to the transit system's route alignment earlier this month.

"We don't want to confuse our customers," Johnson said.

On the Net:

iPod subway maps: <http://www.ipodsubwaymaps.com/>

Bay Area Rapid Transit: <http://www.bart.gov/index.asp>

Metropolitan Transportation Authority: <http://www.mta.nyc.ny.us/>

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